

Common sense spending

by Michael J. Knapp

While the pundits continue to examine the results of the 2004 election for an overarching meaning, I've found the message from the voters to be surprisingly simple: Common sense matters.

That's not a Republican or Democratic message, it's the voters' message — and it's time elected officials took note.

If there's any lesson to be learned from the way northern Montgomery County — the upcounty, which includes Germantown, Hyattstown, Clarksburg, Laytonsville, Olney, Damascus and other communities — voted, it's that we're anxious about what's going on in government.

Look at the results of the three ballot initiatives in the county, each of which, in different ways, limited the power of government. While all three measures failed on a countywide basis, several of the initiatives came close to passing — or did pass — in a majority of the upcounty communities.

Now, that's interesting, and coupled with the fact that the upcounty also split its presidential vote nearly evenly between the two candidates, I think it's also very revealing. The people are concerned about their government and cautious about their politicians. They're tired of paying high taxes without being sure what they're getting. They don't know what their government is doing because they can't see it. They want accountability in their government and in their elected officials. In short, they want common sense back in our government.

Common sense demands that government respect the value of the dollar they've worked hard for, and which they've entrusted elected officials to oversee and safeguard. That's something both parties can believe in and should work for. The people deserve to know what it is they're paying for, and what they're getting for it. That's even more important given the recent huge increase in property tax assessments countywide.

We can start by asking tough questions about what's important to us. It's clear that Montgomery County residents want a world-class community, but what does that mean? In terms of value, it means we must first determine what services we must pay for to ensure we've taken care of the basic needs of the community — things like good schools, hospitals, fire and police services, and roads. Once we know what we must pay for, we can decide what we would like to pay for, whether that's new parks, art

centers or expanding existing services.

Next, we must determine what levels of funding are adequate for these services and back that up with funding. In the past, we didn't establish priorities. We didn't look at what it takes to maintain and sustain the services we need. But if we're not willing to make a long-term investment, it's not worth doing. We should know how much funding is adequate to ensure we have critical services and infrastructure not just for this year, but for years to come.

Further, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well. Once we determine which services we can afford, we must ensure we get a good return on our investment. We must stop measuring our commitment to a program by how much money we spend on it, or gauge its success by how much money it spends.

That's not to say that we do things on the cheap, but we do them smarter. We build accountability into each program or project — that is, we ask what its priorities are, what it hopes to accomplish, and how long that will take. If it doesn't deliver on its promises, we do things differently, or stop doing them altogether.

This common sense approach works. I used it in my efforts to improve the structure of fire and rescue services in the county. Working with the fire department, we're putting an accountable structure in place, with goals and priorities. We now have a fire and rescue service that will be more accountable to the taxpayers; the next step will be to adequately fund it.

However, we can't rely just on tax revenue to help us realize our priorities; we need to diversify and grow our own revenue streams and stop relying on Annapolis and Rockville to take care of us. We're a pro-business community that has shown it can manage business growth responsibly. It's time to take advantage of that and to start investing in more economic opportunities.

Common sense isn't unique to the upcounty, but upcounty voters expressed this view louder and clearer than anywhere else. The message of the 2004 election is clear: Accountability in government matters.

People work hard for their money; now we need to make their money work hard for them. That's neither Republican nor Democrat, red nor blue.

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